

*As Mummy is a closet 'volcano lover' from way back, we will continue to educate and build on Bianca's general knowledge over the years with this subject and undoubtedly her future ones.*

*It has been great to bring a bit of her daycare world home and viceversa, especially being able to involve the whole family.*

As a collection, the stories reveal not only something of Bianca's interests and progress but also they highlight the fluidity of her learning, activated by her participation with 'people, places and things' across a variety of contexts. Furthermore, the documentation brings to light the way in which meaningful assessment and planning — normally the domain of teachers — has been naturally extended to include members of Bianca's family, thus building further the reciprocity associated with a sociocultural framework of learning and teaching.

## Implications for evaluation

Moss and Petrie (2002) make the point that if a new paradigm centred on relationships is to be taken seriously then changes to the way we judge quality through evaluation must necessarily follow. Instead of an emphasis on externally conceived, predetermined outcomes, approaches are needed which acknowledge the uncertainty, diversity, complexity and ambiguity of learning that is now being highlighted through sociocultural assessment. Yet, as these and other writers such as Ball (1999) and Eisner (2000) emphasise, getting educational planners and regulators to see beyond traditional views of evaluation is a particularly 'hard nut to crack' in the light of political imperatives for an economically-driven society. To date, far less critical attention has been given to the impact of sociocultural perspectives on evaluation, with a result that teachers often find themselves in the contested ground between the policy-makers' demands for accountability (evidenced by certainty, forward planning and outcomes) and their own new-found appreciation of the complexity and uncertainty that comes with 'deeper-level' learning. So often, it is the accountability that wins over. A concrete example of this is the way in which many teachers feel pressured to continue to adhere to a step-by-step 'planning cycle' as an indicator of quality. This positions assessment, planning and evaluation as an orderly, linear, unproblematic



process which is quite the antithesis of responsive and reciprocal teaching and learning. Therefore, a future challenge for the proponents of sociocultural perspectives is to not only reconceptualise planning as 'work in progress' (Patterson & Fleet, 2003) but also recognise that evaluation must sit inside planning (and be documented as such), not as an add-on at the end.

## Concluding thoughts

While we believe that pockets of innovative assessment practice, both in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, are already placing the early childhood sector at the leading edge of educational thinking for the twenty-first century, there are challenges that still stand in the way of progressing sociocultural perspectives further. Firstly, introducing new assessment strategies underpinned by complex theoretical perspectives requires a highly qualified and reflective teaching profession. Yet the sector continues to see the leaching of qualified staff due to poor pay, compromising conditions and lack of professional recognition. Secondly, teachers often feel compelled to adhere to those assessment approaches that meet with system approval in order that regulatory and accreditation requirements are satisfied. If the kind of leadership we are proposing is to become a reality then early childhood planning and policy needs to undergo a paradigm shift in tandem with practice. Thirdly, while early childhood education is attracting more political attention than ever before, the interests of children and their learning appear to be subordinated to economic expediency and the wish to increase taxation revenue by recruiting as many work-capable adults into the workforce as possible. With educational purposes now 'bolted on' to economic imperatives, the willingness of governments to fund reasonable — in some cases any — child non-contact time to document children's learning in a meaningful way is noticeably off the agenda. Sadly, this comes at a time when the sector itself has finally found ways of recording children's learning that are making a positive difference to the lives of children and their families. However, the seeds of change have been sown, and those who work with young children must be supported to continue their work in exploring, facilitating and nurturing new strategies for sociocultural assessment and evaluation that truly reflect the relationships and contexts that shape learning.



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